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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

2 November 1956

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 88-56

SUBJECT: North African Reactions to Recent French Moves*

1. Virtually stalemated by mid-October with respect both to its Algerian and Suez policies, France has taken action in both areas which does much to insure that the transition from French to Moslem rule in North Africa will continue to be accompanied by violence and which may preclude the future economic development of Morocco and Tunisia in concert with France. The French capture of the five Algerian rebel (FLN) leaders has resulted in new outbreaks of violence not only in Algeria but in Morocco and Tunisia, and imperiled France's relations with its former protectorates. Now French intervention in the Suez area threatens to provoke a more profound Arab reaction and increases the chances of an extension of general hostilities throughout North Africa.

2. France's Algerian Policy. It was becoming increasingly clear in France by the beginning of this autumn that the so-called Lacoste-Mollet policy of pacification can social and economic reforms for Algeria had failed. However, Minister-Resident Lacoste, with support from much of the French political right and center and from some of his fellow Socialists, continued to hold firmly to that policy. Faced with rising French public distaste for the heavy costs of pacification, with growing dissatisfaction in his own party, and with the fact of undiminished guerrilla activity in Algeria, Mollet apparently realized the need to advance some sort of political solution, or at least to display some activity prior to the Assembly session opening in early October.

* This memorandum has been coordinated informally with OCI at the working level.

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3. Although the Mollet government had been in unofficial contact with the Algerian rebel leaders during the summer, the premier's political position made it difficult either to expand contacts with a view toward open negotiations or to remain static wholly on the basis of his publicly stated policy. Confined by his vehement stand on Suez, by Lacoste's intransigence, and by the likely need for undue reliance on Communist support for enunciation of a more liberal policy, Mollet sought an alternative to either greater concessions or repression -- thus the abortive attempt to create a political solution which could be imposed on Algeria. We believe that Mollet had no faith in the utility of such a scheme, but took that course in order both to buy time and to demonstrate the absence of any feasible alternative. In fact, the Mollet government was slowly moving in the direction of seeking an accommodation with the Algerian nationalists immediately prior to the capture of the five rebels on 22 October. The Sultan of Morocco and Premier Bourguiba of Tunisia had been at least tacitly encouraged to act as moderators, but not as arbiters, between the French and the FLN.

4. Capture of the FLN Leaders. It seems likely that Mollet was not a party to the French coup, but felt forced to uphold it; a decision confirmed by the great outburst of public and parliamentary enthusiasm which followed. Mollet's freedom of decision on the issue was further restricted by the French interception a few days earlier of the ship Athos, loaded -- apparently in Egypt -- with over 60 tons of weapons for the Algerian rebels. Moreover, shortly before the coup the French had cancelled economic and technical assistance negotiations with Morocco because of displeasure with the Sultan's publicized reception of the rebel leaders. In any case, the capture of the five FLN leaders -- although more easily justified -- bears a strong resemblance to the deposition of the Sultan in 1953, not only in motivation and method, but also in terms of its likely consequences for the French.

5. Reaction in North Africa. The general reaction to the French coup among North African Moslems was one of shocked anger. Morocco and Tunisia made immediate but fruitless representations at Paris for release of the five FLN leaders, and tried without success to obtain US and British intervention. Although diplomatic relations between France on the one hand and Morocco and Tunisia on the other were not broken, most of the representatives concerned have either been recalled or have resigned. Public reaction in Morocco and Tunisia has been violent and widespread.

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6. The sense of outrage at the French action was greatest in Morocco, since the Sultan had received the five rebels as guests under his protection and considered that the French had encouraged him (albeit with the stipulation of discretion) to make contact with the FLN leaders. Moreover, the Sultan was in the act of visiting Tunis for a highly publicized conference on Algeria with Bourguiba and the rebel leaders. The rejection of his mediation attempts could not have been more widely advertised. While Bourguiba has less sense of personal affront, he has vied with the Sultan in condemning the French coup. Nevertheless, both those leaders have done the utmost to restrain their peoples from violent actions.

7. In Algeria, the French capture of the most prominent FLN leaders seems likely to prove counterproductive. New command arrangements for the FLN are being made in Algeria and Cairo, and there is no indication of any abatement of guerrilla activity. The capture of the five leaders not only provides the Algerian nationalist movement with a set of martyrs, but promises to result in increased diplomatic and material assistance from Morocco and Tunisia, where the moderate leaders probably will be forced to make substantial concessions to rising popular sentiment in favor of independence for Algeria. Moreover, there is a widespread belief that over the longer term France will have to negotiate with Algerian nationalists, and that the French will find in their custody the representative Algerians they profess to believe do not exist.

8. The Situation Prior to the Suez Move. With the Moroccan and Tunisian governments appealing for the restoration of order, the North African scene was taking on a more normal aspect. Most reports of continued conflict in Morocco and Tunisia seemed to derive from relatively small-scale French troop movements which stimulated efforts at harassment on the part of the local populace. However, despite some evidence of alarm in North African government circles, the French activities had not appeared as provocative by design. In general, while bitterly assailing Egypt for interference in North Africa, Paris seemed to be trying to quiet the area itself; two important French representatives were sent to Morocco and Tunisia with the mission of re-establishing relations with the Sultan and Bourguiba. There were some indications that the Mollet government, in the belief that it was achieving a position of strength, was contemplating new proposals for an Algerian settlement. But French intervention in the Suez area may result in substantial delay for any positive French action on Algeria.

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9. Meanwhile, aside from their appeals for calm, there has been little information on the intentions of the Moroccan and Tunisian governments. However, it was immediately apparent after the French coup that both the Sultan and Bourguiba were inhibited in their response by dependence on French financial aid. They have been particularly frustrated by the way in which the French have released such aid in dribblets, often on a monthly basis. Thus the Sultan apparently has been actively examining alternative sources of financial assistance, and intends to send an "economic mission" to the US. He has also reshuffled his government, excluding the PDI and increasing Istiqlal representation, but there does not seem to be any marked change in the relatively moderate orientation of the ministers.

10. Probable Effects of the Suez Conflict. There will almost certainly be a strong popular reaction in North Africa to the current efforts to cut Nasser down to proper size. Sympathy strikes and demonstrations probably will be widespread and are likely to touch off a round of rioting and other forms of violence. If French troops are extensively employed for protection of European populations and interests, or if they even undertake more than a necessary minimum of movement, they probably will be attacked in at least some localities by an aroused Moslem populace. In itself, however, such action would not necessarily lead to general hostilities.

11. While feelings of kinship with Egypt and the Arab world in general are relatively deep among the peoples of North Africa, the likely attitudes and actions of the Moroccan and Tunisian governments are difficult to gauge. Neither the Sultan nor Bourguiba are admirers of Nasser, even though Egypt has materially aided the North African nationalist movements. They have resented both his pretensions to leadership of the Arab world and his efforts to extend Egyptian influence within their countries. Moreover, they fully realize the degree of their economic dependence on France and, unless their efforts to find alternative sources of aid bear fruit, are likely to shrink from any drastic break with France at this time. In addition, the interests of both the Sultan and Bourguiba -- especially the latter -- lie in the prevention of disorders which could promote extremist elements into a threat to their leadership and could cause a further setback to the already feeble condition of their countries' economies.

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12. On the other hand, both the Sultan and Bourguiba will be forced to make substantial concessions to popular demands for expression of full solidarity with Egypt and for denunciation of France. Their recent affront at French hands, as well as their apprehension regarding a possible French attempt to re-establish control of their countries -- a contingency we regard as unlikely -- would in any case impell them in that direction. However, we do not believe that either the Sultan or Bourguiba will go much beyond the stage of public and private protests to the French, although their probable demands for either the withdrawal or the strict limitation of French forces in their countries may cause a serious rise of tension. This belief depends upon the continued inability of Morocco and Tunisia to achieve a satisfactory alternative source of economic aid and a new trading pattern.

13. While on balance we believe that the Sultan and Bourguiba as well as the French will attempt to prevent an extension of armed conflict in North Africa, there are at least three factors which militate against their success: (a) recent events have brought Morocco and Tunisia into a closer association with the Algerian nationalists, and increased material and moral support for Algeria could provoke French retaliation; (b) despite high level attempts to control internal troop movements, a large-scale armed clash between French and official North African forces is a clear possibility -- especially in Morocco; and (c) the Moroccan and Tunisian governments -- particularly the latter -- may be unable to satisfy popular demands for anti-French actions and might be replaced with governments of a more extremist character. The odds are probably against these contingencies occurring in the immediate future, but developments both in France and in the Near East could bring about a rapid change in the situation.

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